

ARTICLE APPEARED
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THE WASHINGTON POST
5 March 1981

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U.S. Concerned About Castro Spymaster

The Reagan administration's announced determination to combat flow of Soviet arms to El Salvador's leftist guerrillas has stirred intense controversy. Some Latin American countries — notably Mexico — tend to discount the importance of the Salvadoran leftists' connection with the Cuban and Nicaraguan regimes.

But while others may pooh-pooh the Reagan advisers' concern over Cuban help to the Salvadoran guerrillas, U.S. intelligence experts point to the intermittent presence of a dangerous Cuban official in Nicaragua, the primary transit point for Soviet aid.

The man our intelligence people are worried about is Fernando Vecino Alegria, a 47-year-old major general in Fidel Castro's clandestine service, DGI. He travels under the cover of Castro's minister of higher education.

Here's what intelligence sources have told my associate Dale Van Atta about Vecino's career:

- Born in Havana, Vecino was an early associate of Castro and became an influential member of the inner circle that took control of Cuba after the ouster of Fulgencio Batista.

- Vecino was initially put in charge of a Cuban province, but in 1962 was made director of the National Institute for Agricultural Reform.

- In 1966, while nominally in charge of the Union of Cuban Communist Youth, Vecino performed a se-

cret — and successful — espionage mission in France.

- Later in 1966, Vecino was given overall command of Cuban missile forces — a post that required close connections with the Russians.

- From 1967 to 1974, Vecino performed a number of missions for Castro's secret police, including a period as military attache in North Vietnam. Intelligence sources say he took part in interrogation — and torture — of American prisoners of war.

- Promoted to vice minister of the armed forces in 1975 and made a member of the Cuban Communist Party's central committee, Vecino supervised Castro's adventures in Angola and Ethiopia.

- In 1978, Vecino was named minister of higher education, a post that allowed him to send large numbers of paramilitary agents into various Central American countries under cover of educational assistance.

- In 1979, Vecino set up headquarters in Costa Rica, where he was able to keep in constant touch with the Sandinista rebels while they were fighting Anastasio Somoza's Nicaraguan dictatorship. When the Sandinistas won, Vecino and a sidekick who was also a Cuban general moved to Managua for a time.

Since then, according to intelligence sources, Vecino has been close to the more leftist elements of the Nicaraguan government, making regular

visits to Managua. Among his services to the Nicaraguan regime was arranging the shipment of 100 captured American 105 mm howitzers from Vietnam to Nicaragua. The artillery pieces were shipped to Nicaragua in a vessel operated under Lebanese registry by the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Vecino's role as Castro's spymaster and general troublemaker is well known in Latin America. In fact, his presence anywhere in the area is enough to panic military and intelligence circles. For example, his visit to the Dominican Republic in 1979 with two Cuban transport planes, supposedly to offer humanitarian assistance in the wake of a devastating hurricane, produced a cold rebuff from President Antonio Guzman.

In Nicaragua, meanwhile, Vecino has tried to cash in on the Cubans' military aid to the Sandinistas. Intelligence sources say his DGI cohorts were allowed to prepare the guest list for the rebels' first anniversary celebration last year, and the guests were reportedly frisked by the Cuban police agents. The Cubans also are reported to have a training camp in Nicaragua.

In addition, sources disclosed that Vecino's Cuban agents have maintained two guerrilla training camps in Mexico — one run by the PLO, the other by a Cuban Army major whose second-in-command is an Argentine Montenegro terrorist.